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AUTHOR	Brown, Daniel
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ABSTRACT

To determine the different perspectives of faculty members and peer learning facilitators (students) at Eastern New Mexico University about the development of an improved freshman seminar designed to increase retention, a survey was conducted. The instrument required that participants rate the importance of 52 goals to the desired outcomes associated with the freshman seminar. Eighty percent of faculty teaching a freshman seminar class returned the survey, and 90% of peer learning facilitators also completed the survey. Faculty and peer learning facilitators did not differ significantly in their perception of the need for either higher order thinking skills or Liberal Arts and Academic Values as content areas. The greatest divergence for the two groups was for work and career preparation, with students significantly more interested in the need to embed work and career preparation within the freshman seminar. Findings suggest that faculty are more invested in the traditionalist view of higher education, while students perceive college as an investment toward future earnings in a specific career. The survey also revealed shared and relatively weak faculty and peer learning facilitator attitudes toward the role of Liberal Arts and Academic Values within the existing freshman seminar. Results also indicate that awareness of the powerful role of the General Education curriculum and the University's liberal arts education mission must be raised. (SLD)

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A Comparison of Teaching Goals and Objectives Identified by Faculty and Peer Learning Facilitators Within a Transition Seminar for New College Students

Daniel Brown

2003

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INTRODUCTION

Experiencing not uncommon problems with freshman retention, Eastern New Mexico University began the process of developing UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar in fall 1997. Faculty were recruited to participate as members of a Freshman Seminar Advisory Group (FSAG) with the goal of building a three-credit-hour, academically-based Seminar to be offered for the first time to incoming freshmen during fall 1998. Having participated in conferences sponsored by the National Resource Center on the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition in January and February 1998, FSAG faculty began the process of identifying appropriate goals and objectives for this new course.

Unfortunately, "one size" does not "fit all" in the development of UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar, as FSAG faculty soon realized. Initial goals regarding the architecture of the course included:

- Small class sizes for Eastern Seminars, not-to-exceed 20 students per section;
- The important role of full-time academic faculty as instructors for UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar;
- Including Eastern students as peer learning facilitators in each UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar section;
- The desire that Eastern Seminars not be content-specific;
- The requirement that all freshmen be required to successfully complete UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar and receive academic credit for it;
- The need for an academically-based textbook;
- Details required for the curriculum approval process and University catalog;
- The role of UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar as a component of the University General Education curriculum; and
- The establishment of Seminar sections for Honors students (defined as freshmen having an ACT composite of 25 or greater).

Fleshing out architectural goals into curricular objectives proved more troubling, however, and difficulties were encountered during the development process in the identification of classroom goals and objectives for this new course. Faculty perceived

UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar as a course designed to ease the academic transition of freshmen from the high school environment to higher education. More importantly, faculty drew upon their discipline-specific experience as they began to develop syllabi and course materials; that is, that UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar could be modeled after any course in the curriculum. Peer learning facilitators served as a "real world" assessment of the needs of incoming freshmen and shared their belief in the need for student growth and development in an academic sense; that is, that Eastern's Seminar should provide the skills needed for classroom success.

To quantify these differing perspectives, the Teaching Goals Inventory (TGI) (Angelo and Cross, 1988) was used. As noted by the authors of this instrument, a first step in the teaching – learning process must include the clarification of classroom goals and objectives. Only when one has identified priorities for instruction may resources be identified which enhance student success.

Organized around the concept of clusters incorporating various teaching goals and objectives, the TGI is grounded is extensively grounded in learning theory (Astin 1977; Astin and Panos 1969; Bayer 1975; Bloom 1956; Bowen 1977; Chickering 1969). Clusters within the TGI include:

- Higher-Order Thinking Skills
- Basic Academic Success Skills
- Discipline-Specific Knowledge and Skills
- Liberal Arts and Academic Values
- Work and Career Preparation
- Personal Development

The instrument requires that participants rate the importance of fifty-two goals to the desired outcomes associated with a specific class; that is, to answer the question "what is it that you would like to see you students accomplish in (e.g.) UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar?" The specific nature of the question requires that participant answers respond to their desired outcomes associated with a specific course rather than a University goal or mission objective. Each statement is rated according to a numerical scale according to the following: (1) Not Applicable; (2) Unimportant; (3) Important; (4) Very Important; (5) Essential. Following completion, the TGI may be self-scored for personal analysis and reflection. In this study, however, and to be discussed later, results were pooled and reported in the aggregate. This proved to be an especially powerful approach given that ENMU's UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar curriculum represents the culmination of the work of the FSAC, Program Director, Peer Learning Facilitators, and faculty who have taught the course since its inception.

METHODS

The TGI was distributed to all faculty teaching UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar faculty during fall 1998 approximately one month prior to the beginning of instruction. Participation was voluntary and >80% of faculty returned completed materials for analysis. Peer learning facilitators were asked to complete the TGI during a pre-instruction workshop held just prior to the beginning of the semester. Again, participation was voluntary and >90% of Peer learning facilitators chose to complete the survey.

Data was pooled and comparisons of responses between faculty and Peer learning facilitators were made. Differences for individual cluster responses were identified according to a t-test and Mann-Whitney Rank Sum Test. In addition, differences among the relative importance of each cluster for either faculty or Peer learning facilitator were identified through one-way analysis of variance and the Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance on ranks. Finally, groups which differed from the others were identified in both analyses via Dunn's Method ($p < 0.05$). In the Dunn analyses, the TGI Basic Academic Success Skills cluster was used as the control group to whom other clusters were compared given recent history of the college success program at Eastern (to be discussed later).

RESULTS

Significant differences in response on the TGI were identified in four of the six clusters (Table 1). In each instance, peer learning facilitators were significantly more invested in the importance of Basic Academic Success Skills, Discipline-Specific Knowledge and Skills, Work and Career Preparation, and Personal Development as threads to be embedded in UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar at ENMU.

Results of faculty response analysis to the TGI as measured by the significance of response to individual clusters (Table 2) showed that faculty were significantly more invested in Higher Order Thinking Skills, Discipline-Specific Knowledge, Liberal Arts and Academic Values, and Personal Development than the control cluster of Basic Academic Success Skills. Surprisingly, faculty mean response to Work and Career Preparation as an important component of UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar was less (3.66) than that of Basic Academic Success Skills (3.88).

Results of peer learning facilitator response analysis offers interesting insight into their perception of UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar goals and objectives (Table 3). Peer learning facilitators were significantly less invested in the importance of Discipline-Specific Knowledge and Liberal Arts and Academic Values as important threads to be embedded in this new class! Mean response to the other TGI clusters (Higher Order Thinking Skills, Work and Career Preparation, and Personal Development) could not be statistically differentiated from that of the comparison control of Basic Academic Success Skills.

DISCUSSION

Faculty and peer learning facilitators did not significantly differ in their perception of the need for either Higher Order Thinking Skills or Liberal Arts and Academic Values in the UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar classroom. The strongest faculty response across all six TGI clusters, not surprisingly, involved their desire that the development of Higher Order Thinking Skills be a priority for UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar. Critical thinking was identified as a priority by FSAG faculty during spring 1998 and the first cadre of UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar instructors agreed with the need for student development in this area. As Eastern's UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar instructors have full-time faculty roles on campus, each had undoubtedly observed the need for the development of Higher Order Thinking Skills within their discipline-specific courses.

In four instances, peer learning facilitators were significantly more invested in than faculty in the need for the incorporation of TGI clusters into UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar. Surprisingly, these student mentors identified the need for improving Basic Academic Success Skills, discipline-specific knowledge and skills, work and career preparation skills, and enhancing personal development as valuable threads to be embedded in this new class. These responses highlight important differences in perceptions of the freshman classroom experience between students and University faculty. Before the establishment of UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar, Eastern offered a college success course titled ACS 101 Introduction to University Studies. As shown in Table 4, this course primarily involved skill development and only students meeting specific demographic, academic, and socio-economic criteria were required to enroll. Faculty shared strong opinions regarding the desire that UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar be a very different course from ACS 101 Introduction to University Studies. Peer learning facilitator responses regarding the need for basic skill and personal development in this course can perhaps be explained by either or both of the following. First, many peer learning facilitators participating in this survey had completed Eastern's former college success course within the previous years. A second alternative might be that these students had experienced and realized the need for basic academic success skill development during the transition from K-12 to higher education.

Why the increased desire that work and career preparation be embedded within Eastern's UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar? This was likely due to student attitudes toward the core curriculum. The importance of General Education to the University mission and the role it plays in higher education is poorly understood by many students. Perhaps peer learning facilitators participating in this survey were struggling with the general-versus-professional issue facing higher education today; that is, how does the goal of providing a general, liberal arts education interact with the role played by programs in providing the skills necessary to enter the workforce? Given that responses for faculty and peer learning facilitators exhibited the greatest divergence for work and

career preparation, these results likely indicate that faculty are more invested in the traditionalist view of higher education while students perceive college as an investment toward future earnings in a specific career. This observation is also supported by the degree to which peer learning facilitators were significantly less invested in the need for Liberal Arts and Academic Values within UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar than all but one of the TGI clusters (Table 3).

An additional comment regarding the value of Liberal Arts and Academic Values for survey participants is warranted. As argued previously within this article, the low importance placed on the importance of this cluster to UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar raises questions as to the appreciation of role these values play in higher education. Unfortunately, faculty responded in a very similar fashion with respect to this parameter, raising important questions. Are Eastern faculty fully invested in the need for General Education within the curriculum? Is the message regarding the importance of the liberal arts education being adequately conveyed to students and reinforced within the discipline?

The TGI served as a valuable tool for the identification of classroom goals and objectives during the development of UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar at ENMU. Of special importance were the comparisons of faculty and peer learning facilitator responses to the importance of the six TGI clusters and areas of agreement and statistically significant disagreement were identified.

Most often, the TGI is perceived as a tool for initiating faculty discussion of curriculum within the discipline. The value of this instrument in curriculum development is described here. A secondary and unexpected outcome of this study, however, involved the identification of shared and relatively weak faculty and peer learning facilitator attitudes toward the role of Liberal Arts and Academic Values within UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar. In and of itself, these results indicate that awareness of the powerful role of the General Education curriculum and the University's liberal arts education mission must be raised.

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Table 1

Comparison of teaching goals and objectives for UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar faculty and peer learning facilitators

(Differences for individual cluster responses were identified according to a t-test and Mann-Whitney Rank Sum Test)

TGI Cluster	Faculty	Learning Facilitators	Significance
Higher Order Thinking Skills	4.25	4.20	No Significant Difference
Basic Academic Success Skills	3.87	4.21	Significantly Different ($p < 0.001$)
Discipline-Specific Knowledge and Skills	3.03	3.55	Significantly Different ($p < 0.001$)
Liberal Arts and Academic Values	3.57	3.57	No Significant Difference
Work and Career Preparation	3.65	4.42	Significantly Different ($p < 0.001$)
Personal Development	4.07	4.42	Significantly Different ($p < 0.001$)

Table 2

Comparison of mean TGI cluster response for UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar faculty
(Groups which differed from the others were identified
via Dunn's Method ($p < 0.05$) with the Basic Academic Success Skills
cluster as the comparison Control)

TGI Cluster	Average Response	Significantly Different from Control
Higher Order Thinking Skills	4.25	Yes
Basic Academic Success Skills	3.87	Control
Discipline-Specific Knowledge and Skills	3.03	Yes
Liberal Arts and Academic Values	3.57	Yes
Work and Career Preparation	3.65	No
Personal Development	4.07	Yes

Table 3

Comparison of mean TGI cluster response for UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar peer learning facilitators
(Groups which differed from the others were identified via Dunn's Method ($p < 0.05$) with the Basic Academic Success Skills cluster as the comparison control)

TGI Cluster	Average Response	Significantly Different from Control
Higher Order Thinking Skills	4.20	No
Basic Academic Success Skills	4.21	Control
Discipline-Specific Knowledge and Skills	3.55	Yes
Liberal Arts and Academic Values	3.57	Yes
Work and Career Preparation	4.42	No
Personal Development	4.43	No

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Table 4

Comparison of UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar and ACS 101 Introduction to University Studies course descriptions

UNIV 101 Freshman Seminar (3 credits). Aiding academic and social transition to the University, this interdisciplinary course focuses on critical thinking, research, and writing; social issues for new students; exploration of campus resources; and community building.

ACS 101 Introduction to University Studies (2 credits). Designed to enhance the student's success in college by assisting the student in obtaining skills necessary to reach his/her educational objectives. Topics in the course include assuming responsibilities, career and life planning, making decisions, time planning, test-taking, communication skills, study techniques, question-asking skills, library use, and personal issues that face many college students.

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Organization/Address: Department of Family & Consumer Sciences & Agriculture, ENMU, Portales, NM 88130	Telephone: 505.562.2363 FAX: 505.562.2080
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